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A Change of Heart:
Internal Narratives, Forgiveness & Health

By
Keiko Ehret

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California
San Rafael, CA

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the interconnectedness of forgiveness as a narrative, as a philosophical, religious and cultural phenomenon, and the ways in which forgiveness is increasingly being used as a vehicle for improving health and psychological well-being. By threading together how scholars in a variety of fields have approached these areas of study, we can better understand the way the interdisciplinary nature of forgiveness grants access to heal not merely relationships with others, but also our bodies, our minds, and our relationship with ourselves.

Important to my investigation is understanding that the life circumstances that prompt forgiveness consist of both the lived experiences, as well as the stories that we tell ourselves internally about these experiences. I emphasize that forgiveness is an essential healing process with *both* intrapersonal (internal) and interpersonal (external) moral relations. With a greater focus on the intrapersonal aspects of forgiveness, I explore the ways in which humans are storytelling beings, revealing the interconnectivity we experience with our shared histories, and the role of forgiveness in our ability to heal. Personal stories and narratives will come to be seen as vital ways for all to be able to forgive, which result in greater physical and mental health. By applying the following four elements to our internal narratives around traumas—Element 1: *Speak your truth*; Element 2: *Let go of the alternative ending to the story*; Element 3: *Develop a compassionate story of the other*; and Element 4: *Share your forgiveness story as appropriate*—I suggest that these intentional internal narratives play a key role in accessing the health benefits of forgiveness. Interdisciplinary in nature, my thesis includes research in narrative medicine, religion, philosophy, psychology, sociology, as well as health and healing.

Keywords: forgiveness, compassion, letting go, well-being, health, resilience, expectations, story, self-story, internal narratives, self-narrative, stress management, cognitive framing, healing, happiness.

Here is my book of forgiving

The pages are well worn

Here are the places I struggled

Here are the places I passed through with ease

Here is my book of forgiving

Some of its pages are tear-stained and torn

Some are decorated with joy and laughter

Some of its pages are written with hope

Some are etched with despair

This is my book of forgiving

This book full of stories and secrets

It tells how I finally broke free from being defined by injury

And chose to become a creator again

Offering forgiveness

Accepting that I am forgiven

Creating a world of peace

(Tutu 223, 2014)

Introduction

What is forgiveness? Why is it important? Is it spiritual? What purpose does it serve? What are the cultural or natural obstacles to being more forgiving? These questions and others often come to mind when addressing what role forgiveness plays in our communities, families, and personal lives. Forgiveness can be difficult to define, describe, or convey clearly, since it is often an intense and internal experience; further, it is more than a feeling or a sentiment and can involve the emotional and psychological transformation of all parties involved. I investigate forgiveness through the lenses of historical, spiritual, as well as health and healing evidence. I emphasize the vital role of healing narratives as the vehicles for understanding and applying forgiveness practices that connect with these historical, spiritual and healing perspectives.

In this thesis, I draw upon the literal meaning of forgiveness as “before giving,” and theorize that forgiveness, in essence, is really the process we go through *before* we can give (let go). For the purpose of this exploration, I define forgiveness as an internal process by which an individual is able to let go of negative emotions and thoughts, as well as enhance positive emotions and thoughts, toward self and others associated with harms suffered or traumatic events experienced. I engage several influential thinkers in philosophy and psychology regarding their close examinations of the history and usefulness of forgiveness. Among these are Charles Griswold, as articulated in *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, and Martha Nussbaum, in her book, *Anger and Forgiveness*. I suggest alternative perspectives of forgiveness beyond those they put forth, namely, forgiveness, in my view, as a vital and important healing process that has *both* intrapersonal (internal) and interpersonal (external) moral relations. I also highlight significant work in the realm of forgiveness by esteemed scholars and

influential thinkers such as Brené Brown, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Fred Luskin, Everett Worthington, Jr. and Loren Toussaint. It is my hope to expand upon the research by these and many others, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of creating healing internal narratives about forgiving that allow us to do nothing less than thrive.

By going *beyond* the sole interpersonal aspect of forgiveness, as suggested by Griswold, I am able to dive more deeply into the healing benefits and transformative potential possible through intrapersonal forgiveness. Researchers Julie Juola Exline and Roy Baumeister have also suggested as I do, that forgiveness has both internal (emotional) and external (behavioral) aspects (Cohen 2004). For my thesis I have chosen the more specific terms, intrapersonal (internal), and interpersonal (external). It has been important to differentiate these two different applications of forgiveness in order to better understand the health and relational outcomes. It also would appear that the intrapersonal aspect of forgiveness is the prerequisite to making interpersonal forgiveness possible, which makes the importance of understanding and exploring the intrapersonal aspects that much more vital. Further, to define forgiveness as narrowly as an “interpersonal moral relation” (Griswold xv-xvi) between two individuals, as many do, seems an injustice to the full process and an overly simplistic transactional way of understanding forgiveness, which, as I argue, simply must include a relationship with oneself. Moreover, it is also imperative to understand that simply the external expression, the uttering of the words “I forgive you,” is not in any way an assurance that the forgiveness work is complete, or that it is felt genuinely. Conversely, I suggest that simply because forgiveness has not been openly expressed outwardly, does not mean that it has *not* been genuinely felt.

By understanding more deeply how forgiveness work is done we can avoid the transactional pitfalls, as Nussbaum describes, “[F]orgiveness of the transactional sort, far from being an antidote to anger, looks like a continuation of anger’s payback wish by another

name” (11). Transactional forgiveness usually is experienced as a withholding of forgiveness when particular conditions are not met. This can often include shaming of the offender and a social and moral dismissal of the offender, with the effect of placing the offended person in a higher moral position. Forgiveness in this form—if you can call it that—is, as Nussbaum points out, just another form of payback, and less likely to be a lasting peace and release of animosity. This form of *quid pro quo* forgiveness proves to be exceptionally toxic in familial and romantic relations, because these relationships are so intertwined with our daily life and identity. The inability to let go, and the internalization of these traumas and pains can take on a life of their own that takes harbor in the body. This pain-body¹ then manifests itself as disease or depression, which has the result of inhibiting our full potential.

Redefining forgiveness beyond interpersonal moral relations allows for the offended person to be free to heal his or her pain-body without a need to obligate the perpetrator to do anything *before* granting forgiveness. The offended is therefore more empowered, and more spiritually and emotionally prepared to move on, no longer bound in the pain-relationship of perpetrator and victim. In other words, by attaching strings to the granting of forgiveness, the strings merely become the chains to which the perpetrator may continue to hold the victim emotionally captive. Conversely, it may also be true that the withholding of forgiveness without apology, also prolongs the unhealthy chains between the transgressor and the one transgressed, as Nussbaum explains, “[S]ince humiliation always threatens to undermine reconciliation, it is sometimes important to avoid the whole issue of apology, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission wisely did” (13).

This thesis also explores the vital role that forgiveness plays in healing, most importantly within ourselves, but also in the relationships we have with others. Focusing primarily on the intrapersonal dynamics, I explore forgiveness through restructuring our

internal narratives, which can lead to greater life expectancy and overall health. Burgeoning research in forgiveness has led to numerous studies which now overwhelmingly link forgiveness to longevity and improvements in stress-related health conditions, especially those associated with mental health (Christensen, Enright R. D. et al, Friedrich, J. P. et al, Harris, H. S. and C. Thorsen, Lawler, K. A. et al (2003), Lawler, K. A. et al (2005), Luskin, F., Marks, M. J. et al, Seawell, A. H. et al, Thoresen, C. E. et al, Toussaint, L. L. and Cheadle, A., Toussaint, L. L. et al (2012), Toussaint, L. L. et al (2016), Waltman, M. A. et al, Witvliet et al, Worthington E. L. and Scherer, M.). Further study in the use and effectiveness of journaling and therapeutic sharing of personal narratives, specifically in regard to forgiveness, could well help to yield the data needed to help steer this research further with application potential towards post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental and physical ailments that result from long-term stress.

Forgiveness should be seen as a process, a means of working through difficult emotions and healing ourselves by moving harmful energy and emotions out of our bodies, that can become toxic, physically, emotionally or psychologically. Turning inward, and engaging our somatic healing abilities with forgiveness, allow us to more readily recognize and acknowledge the pain we experience without getting stuck in *identifying* ourselves with the pain. We become pain's victim by personifying the source of our suffering, and refusing to forgive. Defining forgiveness as a process with both interpersonal and intrapersonal moral relations grants us the ability to let go of pain and heal from self-inflicted harms by utilizing the same forgiveness process of healing used when we address the harms done by others. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells us in his *Book of Forgiving*, "Holding on to self-blame keeps us stuck in a prison of the past and limits the potential that lies within the present moment" (2014, 200). How we tell ourselves the story about our experiences of trauma and

disappointment shapes our outlook on life, and has an impact on our physical, as well as psychological health and well-being. Knowing how to develop healthy internal narratives in order to process our grief is the key to healing (Cohen). As Brené Brown states in *Rising Strong*, “We can’t heal if we can’t grieve; we can’t forgive if we can’t grieve” (139).

Why Forgiveness?

“Looking back I realize how dynamic the forgiveness experience has been. It changes shape; some days growing, others withering. It is heart work of the highest order”
(Katy Hutchison, qtd. in Cantacuzino).

Forgiveness has become an emergent topic in realms of health and social contexts over the last twenty to thirty years. Researchers have become increasingly curious about the impacts that forgiveness has on the social structures and health of both those who forgive and those who receive forgiveness. Research in the use of forgiveness in health initially surfaced in the early 1960s (Emerson), and prior had been left to its long historical association within religious contexts. The research has reemerged in abundance, beginning in the early 1990s, perhaps inspired by the work done with the 1996 establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa,² and the Gacaca (Ga-Cha-Cha) courts in Rwanda³ held from 2001 through 2011. Many psychologists and sociologists have done extensive studies to better understand how communities can heal from such extreme violence. Research has since expanded to include applications to interpersonal hurts and traumas between individuals, which has resulted in a large number of studies and data becoming newly available in the sciences about the role of forgiveness in our health and well-being. However, what is generally not included in these studies and findings are the steps that we may need to take in order to internally process the emotions that arise from the harms suffered.

Fred Luskin, cofounder and director of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University, is one of the few notable exceptions. Luskin proposed his prescription for healing through

forgiveness in his book, *Forgive for Good*, which is based upon his research and successes working with a number of people impacted by the violence in Northern Ireland⁴. His method follows specific steps to come to a place of letting go of, but not a denial of, the anger and pain we have a tendency to hold onto after we are hurt. These steps include balancing personal and impersonal hurts, taking responsibility for our own feelings, and moving toward changing a grievance story into a forgiveness story. His pioneering work in this area has also had an influence on the continued study of forgiveness in the realm of science and medicine.

Martha Nussbaum, in her book, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, is more dismissive of the power of forgiveness to heal. In addressing anger and pain, rather than therapies of forgiveness, she advises exercising, or partaking of, distracting activities to keep from dwelling on anger or our experiences of pain, and suggests we are best advised to simply move on. Lusk might suggest to her that, with forgiveness, “people retain their ability to be angry but simply use that ability more wisely” (vii). However, Nussbaum expresses great skepticism of the “lucrative” therapies suggested by psychologists, and psychiatrists with implications that they advise these therapies because “it is their trade,” implying financial incentives are the drive behind them:

The real issue is, after all, the loss, and how to move on from that.

In short, if a person is dominated by angry and punitive thoughts, something needs to be done about that, and a struggle within the self needs to be fought. Is the quest for ‘forgiveness’ a useful form of that struggle? It’s like struggling with loss of faith by thinking about God all the time. There is a lucrative profession of anger therapy, and so those therapists convince people that forgiveness (of the internal sort) is valuable. But maybe singing lessons, or going to the gym, or, more generally, focusing on areas of competence and

self-esteem, and making new friends (a task that is not assisted by a persistent focus on anger and blame) would be better ways of throwing off the dead weight of the past. (126)

Contrary to Nussbaum's assertion for a need to rebuild self-esteem after suffering a hurt, Luskkin rightfully contends that "being hurt is not a sign of weakness, stupidity or lack of self-esteem. Often it simply means we lack the training in how to do things differently" (13). Nussbaum offers little to no evidence to support the ineffectiveness of therapies that utilize forgiveness, offering no alternative therapies or treatments of her own to work through the feelings, and instead seems to support avoidance or denial as a coping strategy. It is unfortunate that she seems to miss that forgiveness-based therapies get at root causes that not only change the outlook on a current situation, but also prevent or lessen harms and traumas of the same nature in the future. Numerous studies now affirm the effectiveness of forgiveness therapies, not only to stem anger, but also to improve health and longevity. Forgiveness is the process by which we can overcome pain and trauma in order to be grounded in the present so we can more appropriately respond to things now and in the future.

Charles Griswold, in his book, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, admits that his narrow definition of forgiveness as "interpersonal moral relations between individuals," complicates the idea of forgiving one's self or the dead. Surely, such a limited perspective bypasses many of the advantages of intrapersonal aspects of forgiveness. He is left to argue that it is impossible to forgive one's self. Alternatively, I propose that the interpersonal model he exemplifies is simply the easiest facet of forgiveness to "witness" and therefore analyze for his purposes, but in no way encompasses the totality of forgiveness. There are plenty of harms and hurts inflicted by groups of people (rather than individuals), nature (acts of God),

those who have since died, or even harms we inflict upon ourselves. These models of forgiveness are often more difficult to process since there may be an absence of another individual person with whom to do the healing work, which is typically required in order to forgive in the interpersonal sense. However, it is very possible, and important, to include these additional examples in order to have a more holistic understanding of what forgiveness is and is not. Conversely, I suggest that self-forgiveness and forgiveness of the dead are possible through internal narratives around traumatic events, which can serve as a prerequisite to the interpersonal relations Griswold explores more deeply.

Taking a more inclusive approach to understanding forgiveness enables us to more readily recognize forgiveness as “a very complex act, including human reason, emotions, feelings, and spiritual dimensions of our existence, and touching the whole existence of the individual” (Svetelj 2).⁵ Regardless of whether a person chooses to forgive or not, one will still need to face and address the life circumstances that created the hurt in the first place. Forgiveness does not make others more faithful or have more integrity. Further work in boundary setting or reassessing expectations may also be needed as a part of the healing process. Forgiving others will not be a magic pill to fix everything, but as Lusk tells us, “[F]orgiveness is the first and most important step in living out a new story” (x). Surely, addressing the challenges in life with a heart and mind less weighed down by the stresses of unforgiveness leads to better outcomes and healthier lives.

The ability to forgive makes us more resilient in the face of crisis and adversity, but it was not until recently that research in the sciences reflected a growing interest about the biology, psychology, and health effects of being more or less forgiving. Although pathology related to stress has been well documented for decades, the perception of unforgiveness as a stress has not been as well recognized. Many chronic illnesses that shorten lives and impact

quality of life are perpetuated by stress. Finding strategies and therapies to help those suffering with stress is now of urgent concern among health professionals.

To best understand the benefits of forgiveness in maintaining health, we must first understand the consequences of prolonged stress on the body. Stress is often rooted in fear—a fear of failure, a fear of loss—and the response to stress within the body prepares us for the fight of our lives. Adrenaline starts pumping, heartrate and blood pressure increase, our attention becomes hyper-focused (so we often miss details in the periphery), blood is diverted away from digestion and into our muscles, the amygdala in our brain is activated—which bypasses our rational self, and relies upon more primal fight-flight-freeze responses. These, in turn, impact our mood and our relations with others. In a truly threatening situation, these instinctual impulsive responses to stressors in our environment may save our lives, and that is how and why we have evolved to have such responses. Similar to the way our immune systems will begin to attack itself in the absence of proper pathogens to attack, our stress responses begin reacting to *perceived* threats in the absence of *genuine* threats toward our survival. These heightened responses result in increasing dysfunction and disease.

Diseases of the heart are common consequences of prolonged stress. Unforgiveness is one important form of preventable stress, and has been shown to result in heart disease, the number one killer of Americans for nearly 100 years (Jones). In 2014 there were over 614,000 people who died from diseases of the heart. By 2016 that number increased to nearly 634, 000. I cannot help but wonder how many lives we may be able to prolong and improve through therapies that include compassion and forgiveness.

James Doty, M.D., the Director of Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE), has been looking into the health benefits of prosocial interactions such as compassion and empathy between doctor and patient. He has concluded

that when there is a sense of caring and connection, patients heal faster, show fewer symptoms, and are less likely to become ill (Doty). Similarly, forgiveness, a prosocial interaction, which catalyzes the connection between self and others, boosts our immune systems and alleviates stress.

Unforgiveness is a form of stress

We can see from the above that unforgiveness is a toxic form of stress that results from unresolved grievances in our lives. In other words, we have not properly grieved for the hurt we suffered in the past and continue to carry that burden with us. Stress is disease (disease), or lack of ease, a tension. Stress in the form of unforgiveness is a common reaction involving the suppressing or highlighting of negative emotions in the body, rather than working through them. This suppression or focus on the negative takes effort and is therefore a source of additional stress, which sucks away physical and mental energy that could be put to more effective use. Compounding the stress of unforgiveness combined with the stress initiated by the experience of trauma, may, in fact, be the source of many of our chronic illnesses. As Luskin points out, “Failure to forgive may be more important than hostility as a risk factor for heart disease” (xv). Hatred is a cancer, an unhealthy abnormal growth that brings about only death and destruction of the bodies in which it resides. This is not a healthy way to live, or a constructive way to maintain social relationships with others, whether they be with family, loved ones, friends, acquaintances, work colleagues, or absolute strangers. Hatred eventually eats away at our own happiness and ability to enjoy life. It is a form of self-punishment. Nussbaum agrees, contending that, “Far from being required in order to shore up one’s self-respect, anger actually impedes the assertion of self-respect in worthwhile actions and a meaningful life” (125).

Humans, as problem-solving storytellers by nature, tend to put a great deal of energy into efforts to avoid pain and suffering.⁶ In doing so, there is a tendency to resist being vulnerable, and thus to remain guarded, and to ruminate on or perceive threats that may or may not cause actual harm. Ironically, this guardedness and rumination does harm rather than preventing harm. “We’re really good at focusing the spotlight of our attention on what might hurt us—or hurt those close to us, especially our children. What happens in our bodies when we throw the spotlight on a threat? We get stressed out” (Smith). We do considerable damage to ourselves by holding onto these toxic thoughts and feelings. In *As We Forgive: Stories of Reconciliation from Rwanda*, author Catherine Claire Larson effectively describes this toxification:

Unforgiveness is a powerful cocktail. It can be defined as ‘delayed emotions involving resentment, bitterness, residual anger, residual fear, hatred, hostility, and stress.’ Like all emotions, it is experienced not only mentally, but bodily as well. Muscles throughout the body and face tense, teeth may grind, the stomach may churn, and the pulse may rise. As the study on thought pattern shows, our immune functions may actually be lowered as a result. What’s more, the negative emotions may inhibit our ability to experience positive ones. (159)

Numerous studies now confirm that prolonged stress, including the stressor of unforgiveness, leads to a suppressed immune system and impacts cardiovascular health. There is also evidence to suggest that it is also linked to a decrease in longevity. Further, a number of studies by Toussaint and Worthington give evidence and demonstrate that incorporating forgiveness can mediate these effects, most significantly in the aspects of mental health.

Anger and depression are two of the most common responses to adverse situations. Those who feel justified or empowered to change their circumstances commonly respond with anger. Those who feel defeated by their circumstances are more likely to become

depressed. It is therefore understandable why it is so common to respond to our hurts with anger. However, even if justified or common, this does not necessarily mean that an angry response is effective or healthy. Both anger and depression are masked responses that often inhibit the ability to properly grieve what has been lost, whether that loss is a death, a failed relationship or merely a disappointment in others.

Grief makes us feel vulnerable, and when one has been wounded physically or emotionally, it is normal to initially build a protective wall against further harm. However, it is not healthy to get *stuck* behind a wall of anger or despair. Since anger is such a common response, Nussbaum, in her criticisms of therapeutic approaches to grievances that result in unforgiveness, makes the mistaken assumption that the approach to healing from past harms is done through focusing on anger, blame and resentment. Anger is merely a mask of the pain that persists deeper beneath the surface. Brené Brown believes that “the absence of honest conversation about the hard work that it takes us from lying facedown in the arena to rising strong has led to two dangerous outcomes: the propensity to gold-plate grit and a badassery deficit” (xxiv).

Going to the gym and making new friends, as Nussbaum suggests, will only suppress the pain rather than resolve it. Such approaches can lead to suppressed emotions, which only delay the emotional response with their potential to reemerge later at unexpected times in unexpected ways. As Desmond Tutu says, “When we ignore the pain, it grows bigger and bigger, and like an abscess that is never drained, eventually it will rupture” (2014, 96).

Suppression of these negative feelings, without resolving the core emotions beneath, sets people up to be retriggered by events, circumstances or people that remind them, either consciously or unconsciously, about the painful experience in the past. They might then react to the current circumstance inappropriately without even realizing that the reason the

relationship was sabotaged, or that the opportunity was lost due to an unresolved issue from the past. For example, someone who has had his/her trust betrayed in an intimate relationship may indeed move on to begin a new relationship, but may struggle to be intimate or fully trusting, and perceive betrayal where there is none, making it difficult to have a healthy relationship. The potential consequence may be choking off a loving relationship by inadvertently replaying out events from the past.

When we hold tight to unforgiveness, “stress chemicals flood the body. And suddenly we find that the ‘line between the present and the past blurs, and we feel as if we are being hurt all over again, even though it may be mostly yesterday’s pain that is being triggered” (Larson 158). Finding our own story of forgiveness can bring with it more than peace of mind; further benefits may include an improved immune function, reduced stress, better cardiovascular health, and longevity.

Obstacles to Forgiveness

The ability to forgive and let go is an ongoing process, and may be inhibited by a number of obstacles. Addressing these obstacles as they arise will be important to how well we are able to incorporate forgiveness in the many areas of life. These obstacles can be socially or culturally constructed, or they can be based in our biology, or formulated by habit and temperament. Some of the most common obstacles are the expectations we set of ourselves and others, cultural tendencies toward pain avoidance, and our biological instincts of self-preservation. Each of these three obstacles to forgiveness can be beneficial to our lives in other ways, but it is also important to be aware of the ways in which they can impede our ability to heal if left unchecked.

Expectations

One of the important ways that we can take an active part in reducing the number of circumstances in our lives that get us stuck in unforgiveness is to look at how we set up our expectations. It is easy to unknowingly set unreasonable expectations of ourselves and others, and, left as such, these expectations create frustrations, disappointments, and resentments. We often see a role as “fixed” and the expectation as negotiable. But what if, instead, we were to flip that around and set our expectations about others based on what they have demonstrated we can realistically expect of them? It would require us to also reassess and potentially adjust what role or relationship we want them to have in our lives. Setting expectations in this way honors the fact that we cannot change others, only ourselves, and leaves us in a better position to avoid unnecessary hurts and disappointments from unmet expectations. In other words, we are setting better boundaries.

Socially and culturally we generally come to acquire a template of expectations for various roles and relationships that touch our lives: parents, spouses/partners, colleagues, close friendships, and siblings. While the templates may appear on the surface to include reasonable expectations based upon the role they have in our life—mother, father, child, spouse, friend—they may not be reasonable expectations of the individual’s capabilities or personality. Insisting upon maintaining unrealistic expectations only sets us up for conflicts and creates the framework for cycles of harm to occur and pain to be inflicted, mentally, physically or emotionally. As Anne Lamott puts it, “Expectations are resentments under construction” (par. 14). Addressing the disparity between the socially and culturally constructed templates and what is realistic to expect of others within our own expectation framework helps us develop our compassionate story of the other and, in that way, facilitates forgiveness.

How do these templates apply? Let’s consider one example —expectations of a parent. Based on social and cultural norms, a child should reasonably be able to expect a parent to regularly participate in his/her life, give gifts on holidays and birthdays, provide nurturing and love as s/he grows up. This is a template for what many would see as reasonable expectations for a parent based on the *role* a parent may play in a child’s life. However, an individual’s life experience has an impact on how s/he may fit into this template, and there are a multitude of circumstances that may limit this individual from participating in his/her child’s life to an ideal degree. If the child can learn—usually with help from another loving and caring adult—to reset or adjust expectations to a reasonable, but still healthy level, based on what that parent has demonstrated they are capable of, there is greater opportunity for happiness, and less chance of disappointment and frustration that can further strain the relationship. This does not mean that one cannot *hope for* or even *encourage* the parent to do more, only that the

internal expectations that govern the day-to-day relations between parent and child are, instead, constructed for more successful emotional regulation regarding this relationship.

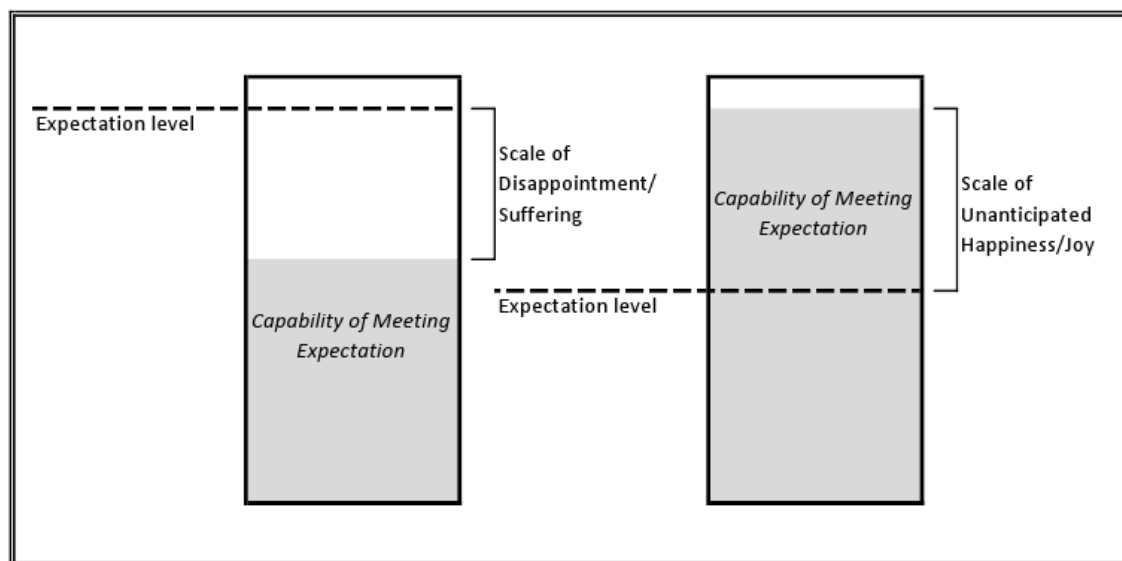


Figure 1. *Relational Expectation Model (Ehret)*

In the graphic above, I illustrate the way this change of expectation shifts our perception of happiness or suffering. When we modify our expectations we are able to change our emotional responses. Depending on how unhealthy the relationship is, and for the emotional wellbeing of the child who may be too young to develop this emotional skill, it may also be necessary for the parent to play a lesser role in the child's life. On the scale of expectations (see fig. 1), the bar should not be set so low that it opens the door to abuse or neglect. In those circumstances it may be necessary to discontinue the relationship. Not all relationships are reconcilable. It is possible, though often more challenging, to surrogate the unfulfilled needs from the parent, through support from the other parent or other healthy influential figures to fill this gap in social/emotional needs. Sometimes it takes a village.

Nussbaum seems to support my assessment of the relationship between expectation and disappointment or joy. She asserts, “If . . . you expect every sales clerk to be intelligent, polite, and helpful, you set yourself up for a life of disappointment” (144). By keeping our

expectations reasonable, and grounded in what experience has told us we can truly come to expect, we are better able to navigate our lives without creating the pitfalls that lead to anger, frustration, and the hurts that contribute greatly to relations requiring apology and forgiveness. Heeding the old cliché—do you want to be right or be happy?—we can learn to recognize that what we conceive of as being “wronged” is directly tied to expectations, and unrealistic expectations then lead us to bitterness.

In *Solve For Happy*, Mo Gawdat argues that our perceived reality tends to be correlated to our expectations. When we believe we are experiencing negative events, he tells us, “[T]he repetitive loop of thinking of an event, comparing it unfavorably to our expectations, leads to suffering. Our inability to take action triggers the recall of the thought over and over in an endless suffering cycle” (59). In other words, if we change our expectations, we also change our perception of our lives, and our perceptions of others.

Life, in general, is unpredictable and equally holds a potential of great danger and unexpected good fortune. We can navigate the potentiality for danger and misfortune through the voluntary interactions of promises and forgiveness. Those who suffer childhood traumas that are left unresolved will tend to see the world as less trustworthy and as a great threat. This can make trusting the promises of others more difficult, which also makes forgiveness of others less likely (Christensen 16). With each trauma, with each breach of trust, the ability to believe in the benevolence of others can be more difficult; yet, to be happy, content, and healthy, it is important to keep doing the work that allows us to assume and recognize that we are all doing the best we can.

To best work through the emotions and interweaving of grief, shame, anger, fear, and regret, we must first learn to set appropriate expectations of those with whom we interact in our lives. We are conditioned by human nature to see relationships as transactional; e.g., I do

this, so you will do that. This relationship strategy can often lead to unhealthy expectations, and unintended internal conflicts. Control of others is an illusion. We often use our knowledge of others, or of past relationships with others, as a guide to help us interact appropriately with new acquaintances. We may even use political or psychological skill to influence or manipulate others, for good or bad, to see the world the way we do. However, we are all operating under unique past experiences, current pressures and understandings, and with different value systems, all of which would seem to make the reality of “control” over others illusory. However, because this is how we are conditioned to see our relationships to others, there is a common belief that we can manipulate others into feeling a particular way or thinking particular thoughts with our persistence. I believe this is precisely where the resistance to forgiveness stems from.

When we are withholding forgiveness, we somehow believe that, by holding onto the anguish and anger from a wrong done to us, we will somehow get the other person to feel badly, or at least feel sorry enough to extract an apology. Neither is logical. Our insistence on holding others accountable for our own feelings only makes our inability to control the reactions of others ever more frustrating. In these circumstances, we are setting up the potentially futile expectation that others will convert and see things the way we do. These unfulfilled expectations, added to the pain or anger already felt, due to the initial grievance, will begin to build a wall around our hearts. As part of the grieving process of forgiveness, we must let go of the mistaken belief that we have control over others. We grieve that our worldview has been altered, that our trust in ourselves or others is broken, or that our imagined possibilities for ourselves or others are crushed. It is appropriate to grieve these things. The understanding of our past lived experiences can be rebuilt or reimagined, but we will not be the same as we used to be, and that is okay.

I am suggesting that recalibrating our expectations in the relationships we have with others, as well as the expectations we set for ourselves, helps us to avoid unnecessary pain and inflict less harm on others. Unrealistic expectations are the seeds of unforgiveness that can build up into greater stresses that impact our emotional and physical well-being.

“Disappointment is unmet expectations, and the more significant the expectations, the more significant the disappointment” (Brown 139). Knowing how to set appropriate expectations is an important skill to master for emotional health. When we can properly regulate our emotions, it helps us to engage with others in healthy and productive ways. This is what I refer to as, “meeting people where they are.” By allowing others to be *who* they are, and readjusting the prominence of the role they play in our lives based upon the expectations we can realistically set for them, we are then also better able to set appropriate boundaries in our relationships with others. Maintaining healthy boundaries is another important key to being able to fully access our empathy, compassion and forgiveness, for, as we have seen, the absence of these boundaries leads to hurts and resentments that inhibit trust and connections to others.

Culture of Pain Avoidance

In the United States, we are hearing more and more tragic stories regarding epidemics of various addictions involving illicit and prescription painkillers. As many seek escape from the painful realities of life, they are resorting to more and more dangerous forms of self-medicating. Pharmaceutical companies and doctors who prescribe the drugs have made it far too easy to think a “magic pill” can alleviate our suffering, no matter what the cause may be. Our cultural inability to see pain as a teacher and recognize that it serves as an “early alert system” has led us to misunderstand it. Many people see pain as the source of the problem,

rather than investigating the underlying root causes of it. The escapist and numbing effects of other more accessible narcotics and alcohol, are also a form of self-medicating to temporarily relieve pain and suffering. The problem is, that as the drugs wear off, the user is faced with the unaddressed cause of the pain, and so the suffering returns. Why are we culturally predisposed to interpreting pain as an enemy?

Attempts to avoid pain lead us to take fewer risks in relationships (both good and bad), and to a resistance to being vulnerable to others. The pain of embarrassment is at the root of the greatest fear, public speaking, which is feared more than death. Doctors, uncomfortable with patients' pain, over-prescribe powerful painkillers, which are too commonly abused. All of these efforts to avoid exposure to or experience of pain actually move us away from the intimacy and compassion that hold communities, families, and personal relationships together. Is it any wonder that drug abuse and alcoholism are epidemic, and divorce rates are high? In the political realm, avoiding pain means turning a blind eye or letting some suffer in order that others we care about, or we ourselves, may suffer less, rather than seeing the whole community together for better or worse. A compassionate community is an uncomfortable community, because it sees and acknowledges the pain of those within it as our own. Without the willingness to risk pain and vulnerability, society is stymied, justice becomes harsh, and bitterness and anger prevail. Compassion and forgiveness both involve vulnerability, and are needed in order to maintain peace and order.

Our minds are conditioned to interpret pain as something that deserves our full attention. It is the flashing red light, an indicator that there is a danger that demands our attention and requires some action. The flashing light is not itself a danger. When in pain, we will take action, either appropriate or inappropriate, but it is not in our nature to sit back and carry on living our lives in a state of ongoing pain. With regard to emotional pain, we often

have the irrational notion that by inflicting the pain we are suffering on others our pain will be lessened (revenge). This is a transactional interpretation of the victim-perpetrator relationship that only serves as the catalyst for continuing our pain, and revenge is rarely how our pain is actually reduced. In order to end the cycles of violence and pain, we need to recognize when we are experiencing pain, as the “flashing light” that indicates there is something we are meant to learn.

Overcoming Biological Instincts and Social Barriers

Human beings are complex animals. We have developed instincts that efficiently protect us when we find ourselves in danger. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the instinctual stress response of fight, flight or freeze. In such a response, one becomes enraged and attempts to control the circumstances through an aggressive response to the danger, runs away from signs of danger in the attempt to escape from harm, or becomes immobilized by emotions or fear. These instincts are designed for scenarios that involve life-or-death impulsive reactions in order to address immediate danger. These responses also arise to *perceived* threats that question our ability to survive. Although these instincts have beneficially contributed to our evolution and success as a species, these same instincts have become largely dysfunctional as threats to our safety, security, and well-being; further, they have become increasingly complicated and more nuanced. Stressors today are less about being mutilated by an animal predator and more about things that pose a threat to our job, family, home, or other resources. Over time these instincts have been culturally reformulated to include threats against our identity; these include threats against our religious, political or ethnic communities to which we belong and with which we identify. In other words, we have come to include our personal ethics, politics, and the communities with which we identify as

an extension of our *self*, and we elicit the same primal stress response equally to the threat of losing who we *think* we are as we do to threats or dangers to our physical self.

We have evolved into highly social beings, group-minded even, and from this we have developed more complex relationships to others that have necessitated being compassionate and forgiving toward our in-group; moreover, in our ever-shrinking world, we rely upon alliances with out-groups for our basic needs. All these changes in the structure of our enlarged sense of self and community have conditioned us to develop ever more complexly connected communities. These social changes, combined with the quickly evolving methods and variations of communication, have also had an impact on how our brains process information. For example, we tend to respond to things, people, and cultural traditions we do not understand with fear, which can elicit the same stress response as actual threats. These complexities, in turn, further change our culture, and continually reshape the policies and agreements between both group and individuals. This continual reshaping of the cultural landscape can also contribute to an increasingly fear-based dysfunctional feedback loop. As such, we have not yet evolved ways to manage the new concerns or perceived threats in ways that are beneficial to our health.

Culturally and politically we are manipulated into being in a continual state of stress and fear. These primal responses to perceived threats are carried out through our amygdala, which bypasses our more evolved, rational brain. In other words, even when we know at a rational level that there is nothing to be afraid of, our bodies respond in fight-flight-freeze stress responses anyway. However, all is not lost, because we have also developed helpful tools to lessen the intensity and shorten the length of time we experience these same stress responses. The ability to forgive is one of these important and helpful emotional tools we have within us to combat stress.

The process that we go through internally in order to forgive requires a taming of the animal instinct to escape from or to seek revenge against, that which posed a threat to who we are. The fact that forgiveness goes against our primal biology makes the resistance to forgiveness understandable. Forgiveness, although beneficial to our long-term well-being, goes against the natural and cultural conditioning that has shaped how we protect ourselves and others when faced with harm. There are a number of challenges in trying to apply forgiveness universally across diverse cultures, since forgiveness is an intense and internal process with cultural, moral, and religious implications. Variations in social attempts to do so exist, such as efforts to use restorative justice, instead of purely punitive processes in legal systems.

One such example was envisioned when apartheid came to an end in South Africa. In response to the political and cultural chaos, there were acts of violence and crimes that required legal action. In an effort to maintain order and reconstruct a functional society that would consist of both former abusers and their victims, they had to decide whether to take a punitive approach, such as the trials in Nuremburg after the fall of Nazi Germany, or ignore or dismiss the retaliations against those who took part in the oppressive apartheid regime. The civic and spiritual leadership of South Africa chose instead a new path, a middle-way, a more peaceful resolution sought through the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who described the proceedings as, “an incubation chamber for national healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness” (Smith). The aim or purpose of the commission was to hear out the *stories* of harms suffered, and hear out the *stories* of those who inflicted harm, and preside upon these cases with restorative justice, through understanding and compassion toward all the parties involved.

Many found closure and resolution, and the process had a cathartic effect for some who confessed to the harms afflicted on others.

Linda Biehl and the men convicted of killing her daughter, Amy, chose to participate in the TRC, which resulted in reduced sentences for the men convicted for Amy's death. This is one of many examples of the ways in which the TRC was successful in bringing people together to heal through restorative justice, which has included the continued communal sharing of personal stories. As Linda summarizes, "I can't look at myself as a victim – it diminishes me as a person. And Easy and Ntobeko don't see themselves as killers. They didn't set out to kill Amy Biehl. But Easy has told me that it's one thing to reconcile what happened as a political activist, quite another to reconcile it in your heart" (qtd. in Cantacuzino). Easy, one of the men involved in Amy's death speaks of his intentions, explaining, "Amnesty wasn't my motivation. I just wanted to ask for forgiveness. I wanted to say in front of Linda and Peter, face to face, 'I am sorry, can you forgive me?' I wanted to be free in my mind and body. It must have been so painful for them to lose their daughter, but by coming to South Africa – not to speak of recrimination, but to speak of the pain of our struggle – they gave me back my freedom" (qtd. in Cantacuzino). Through the forgiveness of the family and the continued communication and relationship between them, Easy and Ntobeko had their sentences reduced, and would later go on to work for the foundation Linda and her husband launched in Amy's name. Surely, through stories like these we can learn to overcome the urge to retaliate and perpetuate cycles of violence that are orchestrated through our more primal fight-flight-freeze biological reaction.

Thankfully, socially and biologically, we have stories as an alternative tool to help us navigate adversity, rather than relying solely on the fight-flight-freeze response. Our need for understanding drives our story-making. As Brené Brown explains, "In the absence of data, we

will always make up stories. It's how we are wired. In fact, we need to make up a story, especially when we are hurt, it is part of our primitive survival wiring. Meaning making is in our biology, and our default is often to come up with a story that makes sense, feels familiar, and offers us insight into how best to self-protect" (79).

Our biology, in other words, even in creating story, primarily aims at more of an immediate goal of self-preservation. I propose in this thesis to be more intentional in reconstructing internal stories that are more forgiving, for these can fulfill the same drive for understanding, by looking at our shared humanity. Understanding both sides of a story has the potential to lead to long-term *healthy* self-preservation.

Understanding Forgiveness

Forgiveness: A History

Forgiveness in the way that many understand it today is a relatively new concept. David Konstan, of Brown University, states in his book, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea*, “[F]orgiveness is not a simple notion but is part of a constellation of ethical and emotional concepts, including remorse and personal transformation, which together constitute one aspect of modern moral consciousness. As will appear, these related ideas too are absent in classical thought or, if not wholly missing, play nothing like the role they do in relation to forgiveness today”(x). This modern transactional understanding of forgiveness—as an interpersonal exchange between individuals, or between an individual and a group—is perhaps seeded, he argues, by the ethical values of reconciliation and justice as described by the philosophers of antiquity. Stoics, such as Marcus Aurelius, believed that people’s harmful actions were not done out of an evil intent, but rather out of *amathia*, lacking of wisdom or an inability to learn. While in there was not the same sense of forgiveness between individuals in these early ethical value systems, one might be encouraged to dismiss the actions of others on the basis of their inability to know better.

Seeking out the basis of modern forgiveness it is, however, notable that there is no mention of reconciliation or forgiveness among the Aristotelian moral virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Paulin Manwelo suggests, “Political philosophy is the study of economic, legal and political structures which seek to promote a rightful society. In this context, reconciliation, understood as essentially religious and/or regarding interpersonal relations, has little to do with the essentially structural approach of political philosophy” (18). Manwelo further suggests that it is not until great needs arose to deal with irreconcilable

aspects of religious and cultural pluralism that we find reconciliation and tolerance in political philosophy as found in John Rawl's work, *A Theory of Justice*.⁷

However, forgiveness as found historically within religious texts, as well as how it is practiced among several faith traditions today, is usually attributed to an individual's relationship with God, and not necessarily an interpersonal phenomenon nor the more modern understanding as an internal process. In an historical context, therefore, the ability to forgive for both redemption and justice seems transactional, quid-pro-quo,⁸ and reserved almost exclusively for being granted by God or reserved for those on his behalf, such as a priest. During the Renaissance, Luca Pacioli and Leonardo Di Vinci resurrected the Protagorean idea that "man was the measure of all things." This renewed idea about the high value of human beings flourished, eventually extending from science to political philosophy which in turn lead to the idea of individual freedoms that took root in the Enlightenment. These new ideas and scientific explorations of what it is to be human, both challenged long-held religious constructs of the self's relative valuelessness in relation to God, and completely reinterpreted the role of the social and spiritual individual. Prior to this societal metamorphosis, wrongs were generally "righted" through socio-judicial means in which interpersonal forgiveness did not have a role, or wrongs were deemed settled by God's condemnation or forgiveness. As noted, the Enlightenment gave birth to a new enlightened modern "self" which was seen as capable of the power to forgive others. Our modern values of human dignity and civil liberties for all have expanded this power to forgive others to include intrapersonal forgiveness, an ability to forgive ourselves for mistakes or harms we have done to ourselves.

In *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, Charles Griswold of Boston University analyzes the history of forgiveness, and concludes in his thesis that "forgiveness is a concept

that comes with conditions attached” (xv). He continues, “One of my central themes is forgiveness is understood as a moral relation between two individuals, one of whom has wronged the other, and who (at least in the ideal) are capable of communicating with each other. In this ideal context, forgiveness requires reciprocity between injurer and injured. I shall reserve the term *forgiveness* for this interpersonal moral relation” (xv-xvi). I suggest that focusing solely on the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness significantly, and unnecessarily, narrows the true healing potential for forgiveness in everyone’s lives. Additionally, defining it as conditional further limits its application, and thus limits the ability for suffering individuals to heal.

Another researcher in forgiveness studies, David Augsburger, looks at forgiveness across cultures and time, and while addressing anxiety, shame, and guilt, and like Griswold, tends to focus on the external implications (and conditionality) of forgiveness. He explores forgiveness through three lenses: punitive (stemming from fear of punishment), inclusive (stemming from fear of deprivation of love) and reconciliatory forgiveness (consisting of reestablishing mutual justice that includes confession, contrition, restitution and reconciliation). Augsburger considers reconciliatory forgiveness to be the ideal of forgiveness, as it is not founded in fear as is punitive or inclusive forgiveness.

Again, it seems important to see the limitations of relying upon the actions of others in order to alleviate the negative emotions associated with harms suffered, whether they be the shame or guilt felt by the transgressor or the pain and grief experienced by the one who has been transgressed. Without recognizing the ability to move to a place of forgiveness with or without the other person(s) being involved, we cut short our ability to heal *unconditionally* from the pain-relationship of victim-perpetrator. This limited understanding only perpetuates unnecessary suffering and furthers resentment and pain.

Forgiveness: A Spiritual Practice

“Our freedom is forged in the fires of forgiving, and we grow into more spiritually evolved people because of it” (Tutu 221, 2014).

Forgiveness is often commonly connected to faith and religiosity, although it is not exclusively a religious practice. For example, Charles Darwin, in the context of understanding social dynamics, concluded, “Those communities that included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best” (72). Sympathy and compassion, in this social context, are very closely connected to the forgiveness process for healing, for they both require stepping out of your own personal experience in an attempt to understand the other, which is, in fact, also how we access the ability to forgive. Moreover, forgiveness is nothing less than an opportunity for healing and rebirth, for as we realign our priorities, we learn through such experiences who we really are and what we truly value most. As Lawrence E. Sullivan states, “Healing always points toward a renewal of creative powers, toward a condition that is vital, stirring strong and whole, as befits a creative beginning” (13). Perhaps this is a reason that we find forgiveness readily in religious texts, as a well of renewal in a world full of challenges and suffering.

In the Catholic tradition, there is the use of the confessional in order to confess sins and request forgiveness. Many in the Abrahamic faiths are encouraged to seek forgiveness from God for their own sins and express forgiveness or pray for the forgiveness of others. They may also seek out their priest, imam, rabbi or pastor for advice in marital or relational affairs when trust has been broken or forgiveness is sought. In an expression of forgiveness, an Amish community in Pennsylvania, when faced with the most egregious of violence

against their community, reached out to the wife of the man who killed ten young Amish girls in their schoolhouse. When asked why, they indicated that it was a requirement of their faith to forgive (*Power of Forgiveness*, 2007). In Buddhism, one is encouraged to have compassion for others, and this includes those who may seem undeserving of compassion. Further, among the indigenous Hawaiians, there is the practice of Ho'oponopono: "I am sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you." It is a regular meditation/prayer to clear out the inner turmoil that accumulates from not making peace with yourself and others—"errors" of thought—which the Hawaiians believe is the source of all problems and sickness in the physical world (Davis).

Forgiveness is a way of looking at the events in our lives through a lens of compassion, learning from these events, and resisting the tendency toward vengeance and hatred. Many spiritual traditions recognize the benefits for the "whole" if grudges and anger are not given space to fester and grow within the individuals; these traditions encourage, and some might say require, people to be forgiving. Forgiving is a healing process—that which Sullivan calls a "creative beginning" (13), perhaps a spiritual one, but one we do within ourselves first and foremost, for, whether or not it is outwardly expressed, we are the first to hear and feel it inside. I also say this because the internal process of forgiveness grants us the power to change our circumstances. This process originates and culminates from within, not from without, and not from others. When we have been harmed, whether by ourselves or by others, true healing must come from within, that is, from tapping into our own inner resources as empowerment to transform pain into a new *reality*. Calling on our own inner resources, this new reality consists of both an experience and a story that we tell ourselves internally about these experiences. This process enables us to avoid the disempowerment that comes from relying on the actions of others before we are willing to grant ourselves permission to heal or feel happiness again.

In a similar way to how our bodies scab over our torn flesh when we are physically injured, we build defensive walls around our hurt feelings. Then, most importantly, we hold onto a story that we tell ourselves about what has occurred. What is the story we tell ourselves? Do we tell stories of what could have been different? Do we dwell on the pain, anguish, anger and hatred? Or alternatively, can we look into the humanity of the perpetrator (ourselves or another), and see this as an opportunity for a life-lesson, or as an example of the dysfunction of humanity at large, rather than the ill-intents of an individual of whom we believe we have become a victim? For some, writing about these experiences in journal form is a meditative or spiritual practice. Others may look to spiritual leaders for guidance.

A religious community can often play an important role in aiding the forgiveness process. To forgive one's self is often the most challenging forgiveness, and it can be easier to begin the process with someone we see as an outside authority to grant us forgiveness. Likewise, in the case of the deceased, granting or obtaining forgiveness – even if initially superficial – often can help to move one in the direction of healing. Offenders, in this case, in the absence of forgiveness from the offended, may still be inclined to reach out to a higher spiritual power for forgiveness, in order to come to terms with their guilt, and then perhaps may find it possible to begin the intrapersonal work of forgiving themselves. This understanding of forgiveness is incomplete, insofar as I would define forgiveness in the interpersonal sense. However, this alternative means of accessing forgiveness plays an important role in providing a way toward self-forgiveness for the offender who has had a change of heart, particularly when the victim is unavailable, or perhaps, no longer alive to grant forgiveness. As Griswold asserts, “We ask God to forgive us the wrongs we have done to *others*, and thus on behalf of others” (xvi). The result of this innovative new understanding

of forgiveness and how it works within us (as applied), is reduced stress, improved health and immunity, as well as resiliency in relationships.

Jesus did not say, “I forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He said to God, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:43). His was an appeal on their behalf, and certainly demonstrates that he was compassionate and was able to see the shared humanity of those who did him harm. Today, forgiveness has an expanded meaning, and is increasingly being seen as a gift we give to ourselves and others, and not solely dependent on being granted by the power of God in an appeal or exchange. The idea that an individual is empowered to grant forgiveness is a relatively modern interpretation of the act of forgiveness. Many, particularly those among the Abrahamic faiths, still see the power to forgive as a spiritual extension of God’s grace. The increasingly variable interpretations on forgiveness granting make it possible for a larger number of people of many faiths, as well as the agnostic, to access the ability to heal and let go through compassion and forgiveness.

Forgiveness: A Healer

Core suffering is associated with grief, anger or resentment, particularly when the pain is seen as a result of another’s actions or words, or with things we are unable to control or understand. If we choose to hold onto these sentiments emotionally or physically, or if there are circumstances with which we still identify as being a victim, this pain becomes trapped within us. It is as if by holding onto this pain-body we can inflict suffering on those who have done us wrong. This pain-body can take on an identity all its own, and in time transform itself into disease or dysfunction within us, just as real as a flesh wound left untreated can fester and generate disease. Our physical bodies do not heal overnight, and so it is similar to our emotions and to our spirit that regenerative healing will naturally take time. Just as with

our flesh, the deeper the wound, the more difficult it is to heal, and some wounds can take a very long time to heal. Many emotional scars do not go away completely, but we can choose whether they serve as positive or negative reminders of the past. Do we tell ourselves a story of weakness and vulnerability, or a story of inner strength and overcoming adversity? Before forgiveness, we may wrap ourselves cocoon-like in our woes, bathing in the pain, and shedding tears that actually assist the healing by releasing stress hormones. We continue in this way until the pain abates long enough for us to ask in earnest, “Why has this happened?” This painful meditation on the very core of our humanness can lead to insights only when we are truly ready to answer our own questions honestly. Finding these answers and addressing them in a way that satisfies our mind, body and soul will lead us out of suffering and toward forgiveness.

Once we are capable of reflecting openly on what has happened, we can begin the healing process with compassion. When considering compassion, the wisdom of philosopher Martha Nussbaum is “that it is consistent with Aristotle's account that the blameworthy as well as the blameless can be the recipients of compassion. This is so in that there is a link between the experience of compassion and the perception that an injustice has occurred. Hence, even if a person is not morally excellent and indeed is at fault for the condition he or she finds himself in, this can still be the occasion for compassion if the suffering undergone is not proportionate to the degree of blame” (qtd. in Gallagher 235). Qualifiers such as these can make it so that the more egregious the wrong, the more difficult it is to shift this “degree of blame,” but to heal, we must continue to work at seeking out this back story to better understand the other. It is counterintuitive to place the perpetrator at the center of our compassion stories, especially when we are still suffering. This is why people often dismiss forgiveness as an option, and why forgiveness is difficult or impossible to achieve for many

people. Yet, we know that blame and shame only further feed anger (Nussbaum 45) and the healing benefits in the exercise of selflessness are profound. Moreover, the selflessness exhibited through forgiveness can inspire others in similar circumstances to come out of their own pain-bodies, engage their own stories, and move toward healing. Without this introspective exploration—intrapersonal/inner work—, forgiveness, even if stated, will not be truly felt.

On an instinctive level we can usually perceive when a forgiveness granted is genuine. Often it is felt even *before* it has been communicated. Communicating to others that this healing has taken place by acknowledging the other person's humanity and saying, "I forgive you" is the step that takes forgiveness from being an intrapersonal healing experience, to becoming an opportunity for interpersonal healing. The gift that is "given" in interpersonal forgiveness is the easing of the burden of guilt and shame so that both offender and offended may be healed.

Exploring the health benefits associated with forgiveness is currently a growing interest in the medical field. In *A Function of Forgiveness*, Marks, Trafimow, Busche, and Oates, present an "empirical and theoretically derived definition of forgiveness as a prosocial process whereby negative, resentment-based thoughts, emotions, and motivations toward a transgressor are reduced" (1-2). Griswold adds, "The stubborn, sometimes infuriating metaphysical fact that the past cannot be changed would seem to leave us with a small range of options, all of which are modulations of forgetfulness, avoidance, rationalization, or pragmatic acceptance. Yet forgiveness claims not to fall among those alternatives; it is quite a different response to what Hanna Arendt aptly called 'the predicament of irreversibility'" (xv). In other words, we cannot undo what has already been done. Here, again, I suggest that a key to unlocking the transformative power of forgiveness, therefore, is story.

The Importance of Story

“[T]he most fundamental sources of self-understanding are found at the level of story. To put the thesis even more directly: if we are to respond effectively to the global problematique then we must attend to our stories” (Rue 21).

As the above quote affirms, stories play a critical role in healing the ills of the modern age, as well as getting at the root causes of our internal afflictions that are expressed outwardly in the form of global crises. While Rue aims to address cultural stories specifically, it is just as important to address our personal stories which all meld into the greater cultural narrative. This is because humans are, in fact, storytelling animals, for storytelling is a defining characteristic of what it is to be human. Our existence as social beings creates a feedback loop of storytelling and social interaction. Jonathan Gottschall puts it best in, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*:

Story—sacred and profane—is perhaps the main cohering force in human life. A society composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond kinship? Story. As John Gardner puts it, fiction ‘is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy.’ Story is the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart. Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold. (138)

This ability of humankind to communicate through stories and symbols has been the catalyst for most of the advancements and innovations that have paved the way for our current modern societal existence. Where would we be without the foundational documents of society such as the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, the ancient myths of Greece, or the story dances of Indigenous peoples? How would we have been able to evolve

if we did not have the stories of our ancestors to tell us how things ought to be done? “The world’s priests and shamans knew what psychology would later confirm: if you want a message to burrow into a human mind, work it into a story” (Gottschall 118). We have these stories passed down through time so that each generation does not have to rediscover the world from scratch, but rather is able to access the knowledge and benefits from the trials and errors of previous generations and pick up where they left off. Further, stories are also for creative fictional narratives that teach us lessons through allegory and effectively engage our emotions and attention.

Story, thus, is an integral part of who we are. Whether we are aware of it or not, within us we have a form of internal narrator that exists to help weave together all of the stories that we pick up during our lifetime journeys. Stories blend these journeys together, and create a cohesive narrative that we identify with and call “our experience.” In *Solve for Happy*, Mo Gawdat asserts, “Words become our only method to understand and communicate knowledge. We start to narrate what we observe to help us make sense of things. As infants, we do that out loud; then, when it becomes socially awkward, we start moving the narration inside. From then on, it never stops” (53).

This internal narrator is a twenty-four hour storyteller, shaping our identity and communication with others during the day, and formulating the stories or imagined experiences that make up our dreams at night. It is no wonder that many cultures have developed various meditative practices as a way of getting a moment’s cessation of all the babble. When we are born, there is no separation of self. We are connected to everything and everybody around us. We only come to learn about individuation when we begin understanding that everything has its own name. Babies and young children are especially wired for language, and like sponges, babies absorb the experiences of life and learn

verbalization from other humans who speak. In so doing, they begin to move away from a shared existence into an individualized experience.

Human beings are simply wired for story. We are problem solvers, and we run ideas and solutions through our minds, looking for patterns and finding comfort in familiarity, relentlessly, in the form of an internal narrative, or internal story. “We are embedded in stories told to us and generated during our lives, and these efficient packets of mnemonic information not only serve to create individual and social histories, but they always organize our conception of belonging in these contexts and create the ends that guide our actions” (Deacon and Cashman 501). This connection with story is something we all share regardless of language or culture, and is therefore a common ground on which to build an understanding of our shared humanity. When we are able to recognize the humanity of others we can develop healthier relationships with ourselves, our friends, neighbors, and strangers alike. As Gottschall writes, “Humans evolved to crave story. This craving has, on the whole, been a good thing for us. Stories give us pleasure and instruction. They simulate worlds so we can live better in this one. They help bind us into communities and define us as cultures. Stories have been a great boon to our species” (197).

Making use of an internal narrator is helpful in numerous ways, such as learning from our previous mistakes and developing competencies through repetition and reminders. However, story can also be the source of malaise, anxiety and depression. We process and learn through repetition, so when we are still working on solutions, our internal narrator tends to repeat thoughts. When we have suffered a trauma, the thoughts that repeat themselves are often not pleasant or helpful. There is a tendency to dwell on how things might be different, or on how someone should have acted differently, or we should have known better. In this way our mind is attempting to solve our emotional challenges the same

way we approach physical or intellectual challenges. Unless we have a tract for this repetitive thought process to follow in order to lead us out of the darkness, it can have the effect of continuously returning us to the place of pain and repeating the trauma, generating self-inflicted stress. Storytelling across all human cultures and languages has hidden within it a tract we can follow if we learn to recognize the patterns.

The similarity of “story arc” between cultures and among different people was termed by Joseph Campbell as *The Hero’s Journey*. These times of hurt and pain are an opportunity for us to play the hero in our own stories. Taking an active part in our internal narrative stories helps us to access our ability to connect with others and relate to our world in a healthier way. What we tell ourselves about who we are and the experiences we have carries tremendous weight. It influences the relationships we accept or let go of and plays a role in our general health.

Research, such as that done by Paul Zak, has found that viewing character-based narrative story videos consistently resulted in oxytocin synthesis, and that transcendent purposes are most effectively communicated through personal stories (2). Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that forgiveness, as a transcendent purpose in our lives, would also benefit from being presented and explained through story. Our internal narrators already develop the story for us, but we may not be *aware* that it is developing a story about our hurtful or traumatic experiences when they occur; we, thus, may take no active role in the story development, thereby taking a passive role in the narratives that shape our life experiences.

Stories are also an important part of humanity’s spiritual experience. Most people feel that life consists of something bigger or something greater than our own individual existence. As Elie Wiesel puts it in the prologue of *The Gates of the Forest*, “God made Man because He

loves stories.” The way that many have found access to this larger sense of existence is in a form of narrative-formed spiritual practice with others.

Throughout the history of our species, sacred fiction has dominated human existence like nothing else. Religion is the ultimate expression of story’s dominion over our minds. The heroes of sacred fiction do not respect the barrier between the pretend and the real. They swarm through the real world, exerting massive influence. Based on what the sacred stories say, believers regulate the practices of their lives: how they eat, how they wash, how they dress, when they have sex, when they forgive, and when they wage total war in the name of everything holy. (Gottschall 119).

Looking at how we develop stories, particularly allegory and fiction, we see that they often follow a predictable arc or pattern. Stories are generally plotted out in three acts: the first establishes who the main character(s) will be, and the world in which they live. The second is the crisis, the lessons needed to be learned, a turning inward and likely a call to action. “When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion. . . . It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or someone else” (Atwood 298). It is in this second act of our own personal story where people have a tendency to get stuck, preventing them from making it to the final act, part three, where our protagonist(s) persevere, taking them into a new journey of valuable lessons gained about themselves and others.

At the same time, we are capable of weaving together powerful stories that help us better understand and navigate our lives. When we do not understand things as they are, we hypothesize potentials, or make up fictions to fill in the gaps. This is a skill that has helped us to achieve a number of noteworthy accomplishments, but when married to fear, can tap into

our shadow-side, resurrecting primal fears and dispelling hopes and dreams. Our brain's amygdala, part of the limbic system and the initiator of our flight-flight-freeze response, when triggered, has the ability to override our rational brain. So when we become fearful, or think dark thoughts, it can be very hard, perhaps seemingly impossible, to tell a happier story to ourselves.

Having a prescriptive pattern built into our storytelling helps us to recognize the full cycle of trauma and recovery and approach the struggles in our lives in a healthier way. "The narrative core is the most fundamental expression of wisdom in a culture—it tells us about the kind of world we live in, what sorts of things are real and unreal, where we came from, what our true nature is, and how we fit into the larger scheme of things. . . But the narrative core also contains ideas about morality, that is, it tells us what is good for us and how we should conduct ourselves in order to achieve our fulfillment" (Rue, 23).

As science now supports, narrative and moral reasoning show up in the same areas of the brain. A recent study by Dehghani et al found that narrative stories are processed in the area of the brain known as the default mode network. This area of the brain previously thought of as the "auto-pilot" that is generally dormant in performing tasks, is associated with activity during mind wandering or passive resting, and is also involved with our brain's processing of empathy, moral reasoning and autobiographical recall, as well as imagining the future. The fact that our autobiographical thoughts, as well as thoughts of others and our moral reasoning, are all connected in the same areas we process story narratives can clue us in to just how important these narrative stories are to our identity and our ability to process life experiences. The way Jonas Kaplan, one of the authors of the aforementioned article, puts it, "Stories help us to organize information in a unique way."

In our lives the acts that form the narrative of our experiential story do not end with act three. Instead we move through continuous narrative cycles where act three of one cycle becomes the act one of a new cycle. With each return to act one we are renewed and our identity redefined, having gained a deeper knowledge of who we are and what we are capable of overcoming. This is how we set the stage for the next story cycle that will unfold in our lives. However, when we are stuck in an act two of any one of our narrative cycles (which everyone is prone to do on occasion), we fall into despair, or find ourselves in the fight-flight-freeze response without necessarily understanding why. These stress responses hinder us in developing healthy connections with others in our lives, our own futures, and impacts our physical and mental health. Stories are important teachers. Learning how to follow the arcs of stories, which begins as children, we can more readily recognize and understand patterns in the crises or struggles we face. Understanding and recognizing patterns of crises makes it less likely for us to interpret our “act twos” as the finale, the end of the line, but rather, an end to one aspect of self and the beginning of another. Our moments of pain or trauma are important turning points, and there are lessons we are learning. We can be forever changed from traumatic experiences, but that need not always be construed negatively.

Those who are working through the pain of a trauma often seek the support and company of others who have suffered a similar circumstance. Alcoholics Anonymous and group therapies are prominent examples. Former victims, as well as perpetrators of violence who have been able to heal together, are often sources of inspiration to others. Both stories and suffering are universal to the human experience; clearly, it is healing to hear our own stories in the stories of others who have not only suffered, but have also transcended those experiences. It inspires hope and perseverance in those still working through their own “act

two” of the journey. As Brené Brown states, “[W]e feel the most alive when we’re connecting with others and being brave with our stories—it’s in our biology” (6).

Many live their lives unaware that they have some control over this inner narrator and the stories it tells us about their lives. Even without intention, we routinely retell and change our experience stories by means of this internal narrator. In fact, due to the fallibility of our retention of facts about experiences, court systems are relying less and less on the recollections of eyewitness accounts alone, as they have been shown to be unreliable. So if we are prone to reshape our stories, why not do so with intention? Loyal Rue goes even farther in advocating for empowering narratives in *Everybody’s Story: Wising Up to the Epic of Evolution*: “[I]f storytelling is an essential human activity bestowing substance and form on the lives we have—then it would follow that changes at this level of human thought will be among the most profound and far reaching we can imagine. Thus we have good reason to believe that appropriate changes at the level of story might hold the power of reorientation needed for enhancing human solidarity” (21). So, why not choose to take an active role in our internal narratives and adapt our stories as needed for our health and well-being?

Creating a Forgiveness Story

“We are the authors of our lives. We write our own daring endings” (Brown 253).

As I have suggested, we develop a sense of identity by attaching ourselves to various social narratives and by associating our own story as a continuation of a larger storyline that includes the stories of others. This is how we develop cultural and social identities out of our individual lives. We may have little to no control over people or events that take place in our lives, but we do have choices we can make that influence how much or how long these people and events impact our lives. How we choose to experience our lives through the filter of our inner narrator determines who and what we focus on, and how important events or people are to our lives. We have control over how much weight or importance we give them, and therefore, control over the impact people can have on our identity, hopes, and dreams of the future. The empowerment potential of our internal stories lies in finding our way back to reconnecting with others. Here I propose four common elements of forgiveness narratives that, when put together, have a lasting and profound positive impact.

Element 1: Speak Your Truth

What I call *speaking your truth* is similar in its intention to what Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to as *naming the hurt* (Book of Forgiving 93)⁹. Give name to the hurt feelings, acknowledge the bitterness and/or anger for the loss one has suffered or is suffering. Be honest with yourself and let the emotions come up. This does not mean ruminating or obsessing over the emotions that come up, but acknowledge what comes up. Even the words *express* and *emote* mean to move out, to release, to let the energy and feelings move outside of

ourselves. Only by expressing the truth of how we are feeling are we able to make our way through these difficult feelings. We can only address the root causes of what we are experiencing if we dare to be honest about what is hurting us. Masking over the emotions or “putting on a brave face” is a temporary solution in the moment, but like a bitter seed, they can grow bigger over time. Left unattended, these emotions are more likely to resurface later, and often without our understanding of why they have recurred. This is not to suggest that we dwell there, or wallow in the darkness we are experiencing. Working *through* rather than *around* these intense emotions enables us to move forward.

The emotional response to the initial hurt is often overwhelming, perhaps even exaggerated – that is okay – still, let it out. It can be beneficial to do this work with others who are empathic and can serve as an island of emotional stability amid the storm. However, some people may feel the need to do this part alone. These emotions are highly personal at a time when we may feel we are at our most vulnerable. Journal, if that works best for you, but continue to speak the truth about how you are feeling, and get it outside of yourself. The important part is to *let it out*.

When speaking your truth, state how you feel, identify the emotions that come up, and how you feel hurt. Keep asking yourself the question “why?” about your anger, anguish, pain, or sadness until you get to the core. This is not a question of why the situation happened, but rather, why we feel this way about what has happened. This is how we learn where the true pain is coming from, and it may help us identify the hindering frameworks of expectations and/or attachments that we have constructed that have resulted in the hurtful circumstances. The pain we associate with a need for forgiveness is a form of grief. As Nussbaum eloquently puts it, “One source of excess in anger, in fact, is a reluctance to grieve, thus acknowledging helplessness” (47). Being honest with what we are feeling is the first step

in being able to change how we are feeling. If we do not know what we are honestly reacting to, we are far more likely to remain stuck in the darkness.

Element 2: Let Go of the Alternative Endings to the Story

When suffering the loss of something or someone we care for deeply, or when we have experienced the end of a relationship that we identify with and wished had continued, there is a tendency to construe in our mind a story that has an alternative ending to the one that we experience. The loss of this alternative and expected ending, one that is formulated in the mind of the one suffering, is no different than the loss we experience as a death. The severity can be correlated with our expectations or the predictability of the loss. In other words, the more capable we are of aligning our expectations to our lived realities, the less intense we experience the trauma of loss. For example, the end of a romantic relationship is the death of a future planned with this person. If the relationship was troubled or ended amicably, there is likely less grief or need for forgiveness than if it was the result of poor choices and actions by one or both parties.

We learn through experiences of adversity how to regulate our emotions and understand our limitations and boundaries. “Elizabeth Kubler-Ross sums it up beautifully when she says, “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen”” (qtd. in Tutu 220, 2014).

We often mask our grief in either anger or despair, focusing either on the perpetrator of our pain or on what has been lost. The ability to use forgiveness as a process of moving

through anguish or grief requires that we not forget, but rather retell the story to ourselves in a new way. In a word, the story we tell ourselves about what has happened shapes our perspective of it. The deeper the wound that we feel we have suffered, the stronger the urge may be to wish for an alternative outcome. If only I had. . . If only s/he had. . . If only they had. . . Yet the harsh inescapable reality is that, no matter how much we sacrifice our happiness, no matter how much pain we might wish on the perpetrator, the truth still remains that nothing will ever undo the past. What has happened, has happened. Forgiveness is both the acceptance of what is, and a letting go of these alternative endings. It is a way of looking forward with the insights and wisdom that the experience has taught us about ourselves, about the perpetrator(s), and the willingness to begin a new story.

As Tutu has attested, “Each of us can find a way to transform a painful past into a hopeful future. We can develop compassion for others and compassion for ourselves. We can tell a new story of ourselves. The new story admits that ‘yes, I have caused pain and suffering.’ The new story also recognizes that ‘the harm I have caused in the past is not who I am today.’ Self-forgiveness is truly the core of peacemaking, and we cannot build peace with others if we are not at peace with ourselves” (210, 2014).

Element 3: Develop a Compassionate Story of the Other

“ [W]e should continue to maintain three things: that the wrongful act was wrong, that the wrongdoer is a member of the moral community, and that one is oneself a person who ought not to be wronged” (Nussbaum 119).

Forgiveness does require us to tell another story, not only a story of our own experience, but also, a story of understanding about the other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu

tells us, “It is a remarkable feat to be able to see past the inhumanity of the behavior and recognize the humanity of the person committing the atrocious acts. This is not weakness. This is heroic strength, the noblest strength of the human spirit” (2014, 34). This is where compassion plays a significant and critical role in the healing process. An expression that I use often is: “hurt people hurt people.” When someone is inflicting pain upon another person, whether consciously or not, there is usually a battle that is taking place within that perpetrator physically, emotionally or psychologically. It is not always obvious to an outside viewer what that battle is, but often people externalize the pain that they have experienced, or are experiencing inside (alternatively they internalize it, creating disease and dysfunction, as mentioned above). This externalization of pain onto others is what perpetuates the cycle of violence, prolongs wars, and destroys relationships of all sorts. Forgiveness is first and foremost an *intrapersonal process of healing*, is the ONLY process I have experienced, or have come to understand, that can lead to successful and sustained reconciliation. As Paul Gallagher notes, “Mistakes are made, but we can and do forgive out of the compassion that is generated by recognition of their tragic circumstance” (242). This is true of both personal relationships and political situations.

Here I emphasize an important distinction: the difference between showing or expressing compassion for others outwardly and creating a compassion story about them. They need not go hand in hand in all cases. Compassion, as Brené Brown proposes, requires boundaries, or it is not compassion. We should not lose who we are in our quest to understand the other. Some forgiveness researchers have delved into approaches to create compassionate stories of others for the sake of forgiveness. One such researcher, Everett L. Worthington Jr. in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Theory and Application*, developed what he calls the FREE method: Forgiveness and Reconciliation through Experiencing Empathy. He

recognized the importance of repairing relationships through this ability to be compassionate and understanding of another's story through empathy. Importantly, he recognizes the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation, and the purpose of his FREE method is to obtain reconciliation, which he points out is differentiated from forgiveness by the fact that it requires the participation of both affected parties. Worthington's method encourages exploring the stories of all parties to identify and better understand what he calls the "injustice gap" (197). Only by understanding another's story is reconciliation truly facilitated and possible.

Forgiveness and moving away from a natural reaction of externalizing pain onto others, I contend, also involves awareness of the stories of others. "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, 'If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility'" (qtd. in Tutu 217, 2014). Knowing, or at least attempting to learn, why someone does things to hurt others recognizes their humanity, making it more difficult to continue hate and vengeful thoughts.

We can and should start with small forgivenesses. A small forgiveness is something without great consequence, for example, being cut off in traffic. The initial urge might be to curse out the window, or call the offender a name, even if no one else hears it, but you do. Alternatively, we could say to ourselves, "Wow! That person is in such a hurry. I wonder what must be happening in his/her life that would make him/her risk their life like that." The more compassionate story that we can create to better understand why and/or how this person behaved in such a way, the easier it will be to wish the driver a better day. It is unlikely we would actually have a conversation with our fellow traveler to discuss the true intentions behind her/his actions, but we learn to more readily forgive by practicing with these small incidents. This small reflexive way by which to work our forgiveness muscle catalyzes healing,

for it converts the negative impulse into a positive emotion—compassion. Practicing such small acts of forgiveness can help to prepare for forgiving larger more egregious inflictions. Forgiveness via the story we tell ourselves about the offender is deeply intrapersonal, yet it does not stop there. As Martha Nussbaum would agree, “Human beings are, so to speak, narrative creatures, full of mixed motives, so they need to remember the likelihood of hidden narcissism, through a sensitive reading of both self and other” (88).

When we set off in the direction of forgiveness, we are plugging-in and connecting to something far larger than our self. Forgiveness is the recognition and the acceptance that humanity is imperfect. We are all capable of great compassion or great harm, and seeing this larger sense of humanity within the other allows us to take important steps toward forgiveness. It is this reconnection to our shared humanity that grants us the ability to heal from within.

Element 4: Share Your Forgiveness Story As Appropriate

“We do not heal in isolation” (Tutu 221, 2014).

We are seeing that forgiveness is more than merely the interaction or exchange between two individuals. As I have noted, forgiveness literally means “before giving.” I theorize that forgiveness is really the process we go through *before* we can give (let go). When a person who has been hurt and who is able to traverse the pain and tell a perpetrator, in earnest, that s/he is forgiven, the perpetrator is then also freed (though not obligated) to do the inner work necessary to forgive themselves and heal (or not). However, by not obligating the perpetrator to do this inner work *before* granting forgiveness, the offended person in this scenario is freed of their pain-body, and spiritually and emotionally prepared to move on.

S/he is now more empowered, no longer bound in the pain-relationship of perpetrator and victim, regardless of what the offender might choose to do.

There are circumstances when addressing an offender is neither safe nor possible, and this should not be seen as an impediment to forgiveness. Thoughts and actions can still reflect a forgiving intention, and these can be shared with others (e.g., in support groups or with motivational speaking) or kept entirely private. For those willing to be open, forgiveness can have the added potential to heal others, particularly those who share—or will share—similar experiences.

Samantha Lawler's story is an example of the way in which we can navigate the process of forgiveness and heal through a support group. In 1999, Samantha Lawler discovered her mother dead in their home, having been murdered by her father. For over thirteen years this experience plagued Samantha's life resulting in what she describes as a "potent mix of grief and anger." Doing her best to come to terms with what had happened, and with the help of a personal development workshop, Samantha was able to find the strength to be compassionate and to forgive her father. In October 2012, she returned to Florida to see her ailing father where he was incarcerated, and at death's door. She was only permitted 10 minutes to convey to him her forgiveness, beginning with an apology for taking so long to tell him so. Reflecting on this remarkable turning point in her life she says, "I've come to believe that we all have good and bad in us; we're all figuring life out as best we can. When people make the wrong choices they are figuring it out too. Forgiveness is not about forgiving the act but about forgiving the imperfections which are inherent in all of us" (qtd. in Cantacuzino).

Being open and vulnerable enough to share forgiveness stories take a great deal of courage. Tracy McMillan puts it beautifully in her TEDx Talk, "The places where you have

the biggest challenges in your life become the places where you have the most to give.”

Sharing these stories or outwardly expressing forgiveness to the person responsible for causing harm can inspire others, which catalyzes the healing cycle. Brené Brown also recognizes the importance of compassion in sharing such brave stories, in what I have come to see as a form of currency with infinite return on investment. “Courage is contagious. Rising strong changes not just you, but also the people around you. To bear witness to the human potential for transformation through vulnerability, courage, and tenacity can be either a clarion call for more daring or a painful mirror of those of us who are stuck in the aftermath of the fall, unwilling or unable to own our stories” (10).

When I think of the power of storytelling, I cannot help but reflect on the popular movie from 1984, *The Neverending Story*. The film involves Bastian, a young boy who is bullied and whose mother has recently died. To escape, he seeks solace in a book called, *The Neverending Story*. He discovers that this is an exceptionally emotionally engaging storybook. At first, he expresses his disappointments and frustrations with the characters of the book by yelling at them, and shocked to find they hear him. He learns, through engaging with the characters, that the way to help them overcome adversity and be the hero, he must take an active role in the creation of the story. When he successfully engages his imagination, creating his own story, he not only resolves the conflicts in the magical world of *Fantasia* in the storybook, but also breaks through his own fear and grief and finds he has the ability to overcome adversity he faces in his own life. He discovers that he had the ability to create whatever story he wanted; he became the hero in his own life’s story. Like Bastian, we all have the ability to create and control the narrative of our own stories.

Forgiveness Narratives

Medical professionals are quickly changing approaches to care. In addition to explorations in the use of forgiveness in overcoming trauma, a whole new field of Narrative Medicine has emerged from the therapeutic effects of stories. Columbia University was the first to offer a Masters of Science degree in Narrative Medicine in 2009, with an eye toward rehumanizing medical practice—to go beyond merely diagnosing illness and treating symptoms and alleviating pain. Narrative Medicine is an emerging field, which continues to expand and evolve as we begin to better understand the way we process both our own and others' stories in the body, and the impacts that these stories have on our outlook on life, health, and general well-being. Further research is needed to collect qualitative data on the role forgiveness plays within Narrative Medicine, but there is increasing interest among students and medical professionals who are currently exploring the intersectionality of these forms of healing.

In the study of psychology, the ability to see past the immediate negatives in adverse situations is referred to as *positive framing*.¹⁰ “Positive framing isn’t spin or a denial of a negative event. It is a perspective that says there may be more to the outcome than just the current negative. Call it perspective, call it wisdom, call it patience – in reality, it is a combination of all of those things. And in the positive frame, good things can happen” (Eikenberry). Developing a forgiveness story is one variation of creating a positive framework out of adverse events and circumstances which we may be inclined to hold onto as grievances. Our bodies are designed to reward us for listening to and relating to stories, as Zak’s study on narratives reflected. Some of the benefits, like oxytocin synthesis, were internal, making the participants happier, but these narratives also helped in external ways, promoting cooperation and prosocial behaviors.

As Brené Brown points out, “[T]here’s growing empirical evidence that not owning and integrating our stories affects not just our emotional health but also our physical well-being” (67). Clearly, stories are incredibly important to our well-being, both internally—mentally and physically—and externally in our relations with others in our family and community. The ability, thus, to create a positive forgiveness story out of our personal experiences has the potential to tap into the healing power of both stories and forgiveness.

There is a long history connecting internal stories to psychological well-being. Karl Jung was best known for the early study in connecting myths, internal stories and psychology. “When Freud learned from Jung that there was a relationship between mythology and psychology (and you get this from the letters that have been published), Freud then started to study mythology from the standpoint of his psychology. . . The Jungian unconscious is based on a biological point of view. The energies that inform the body are the energies that inform our dreams. But these dreams are inflected by our personal experiences” (Campbell 43-45). In other words, we relate our own experiences to known and familiar mythological and cultural stories, and this has an influence on our minds and bodies.

To better understand how people are processing their inner stories, I put out a request on social media for anyone who was interested in sharing a forgiveness story to contact me. The stories that were shared with me were all incredibly honest and laid bare the struggle that is waged within in order to forgive self and others. From the stories I received I could see more clearly where others were stuck, and what a forgiveness story looks like when the intrapersonal aspects of forgiveness had been reached. The following forgiveness story is one example of a narrative that fully integrated all the elements that I propose are needed. The healing is evident.

ANONYMOUS (*edited as indicated in order to protect identity*)

As you know, that day [I] went to the Jason Mraz concert is otherwise known as my Freedom Day. :) That is the day I decided to draw a line in the sand and not cross it again. I love [my children's father], but his addiction and his family's destructive behavior was damaging our family. I was so mad at him for being what I felt was WEAK because he couldn't stop choosing drugs over us and he couldn't tell his family to back off. I couldn't understand why he chose this, because I was not an addict. I blamed him for ruining our family. I eventually moved on to another relationship, but even that relationship was suffering from my pent up anger and inability to forgive [him]. I had a lot on my plate, and when things got overwhelming (which was often), I would be so filled with rage toward [my children's father] for the way that things were. He was supposed to help me. I didn't want to raise 4 children all on my own.

Worry about being "enough" for my kids consumed my thoughts and I would often lay awake late into the night, unable to shut my brain off so I could get some rest. The only thing that kept me going was my faith in God and belief that he had plans for my family & I to prosper, have hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). When I felt weak and got overwhelmed I would repeat God's promise to myself that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). During one of these sleepless nights, around 2:00 AM, I was feeling the burden of financial pressure, job responsibilities, and a rebellious son. I was back in that familiar pattern of blaming [my children's father] for life's problems. At this point he was so wrapped up in a life of drugs that he saw the kids maybe a couple times a

YEAR. He never reached out, and I in my stubbornness and pride certainly did not either. That night I opened the [B]ible to try to get some answers and God led me to Mark 11:25 - "But when you are praying, FIRST FORGIVE ANYONE YOU ARE HOLDING A GRUDGE AGAINST, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too." It was as if God spoke to me. I sat there for a long time wrestling with God's request. I needed to forgive [my children's father]. But I didn't want to. I didn't feel like he deserved it. I wanted him to suffer, just like the kids and I were suffering. That's when it hit me like a ton of bricks – [my children's father] wasn't suffering because I wouldn't forgive him. I WAS SUFFERING because I wouldn't forgive him. And how could I ask anyone, let alone God, to forgive me for all the things I have done wrong if I couldn't also forgive?

1 Peter 5:7 says "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares for you." I grabbed my journal and began to write. I was crying like a child and pouring my heart, my pain, onto the page in a letter to [my children's father] I would never send. I wasn't writing it for him. I was writing it for me, and I was writing it to give it to God. I wanted to be free from the bitterness. The words flowed so easy, and with each page I literally felt lighter. As I signed the letter, I closed the journal, thanked God for taking this burden from me and fell asleep.

The next evening, as I was taking the exit off the freeway to my house on my way home from work, my phone rang. I glanced at the number and it was [my children's father]. I thought to myself, why on earth is he calling? I answered the phone, and he told me that he was sorry if it sounded weird, but

he was up ALL NIGHT and COULD NOT SLEEP. He said he felt strongly as though God was telling him he needed to call me and apologize for all the hurt he put me and the kids through. I almost CRASHED!!! I could not believe what I was hearing, and to this day there is NO ONE on this earth who can convince me that God does not exist! I pulled the car over and said, "[D]o you know what I was doing last night around 2AM?"

He said, "No, what?"

I said, "I was writing a letter to you forgiving you for everything you have put the kids and me through." I could hear over the phone that he was crying. Neither of us could believe what was happening. It was a God moment. We both sat in tears and silence for a moment. We were both in shock.

"Can you read it to me?" He asked. So I pulled out my journal and tearfully read the words I had written the night before. I knew what I wrote was going to hurt him, but it felt good to "get it off my chest," "clear the air," and all those other cheesy clichés.

Bottom line...the bitterness, the rage, the anger toward [my children's father] was GONE in that moment, lifted away in a way I cannot describe in words. The closest I can come is to say I had a peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7). I began to see [him] with more compassion, and realize that he was sick with a disease that afflicted his family for generations. He did not have the strength to fight it and he had a family that enabled it. I began to pray for him instead of curse him. It was like I opened the prison cell I had the key to and stepped out. :)

The work required of our personal storytelling is incredibly difficult, but hugely transformational, and the benefits are now being studied and better understood among the sciences. This bridge between what has been largely spiritual work, and increasingly becoming an accepted form of rehabilitative or preventive medicine, holds enormous potential.

According to the Henri Nouwen Society, we are all connected through this inner story:

“We like to make a distinction between our private and public lives and say, ‘Whatever I do in my private life is nobody else’s business.’ But anyone trying to live a spiritual life will soon discover that the most personal is the most universal, the most hidden is the most public, and the most solitary is the most communal. What we live in the most intimate places of our beings is not just for us but for all people. That is why our inner lives are lives for others. That is why our solitude is a gift to our community, and that is why our most secret thoughts affect our common life.” (par. 1)

Much of the field work of Narrative Medicine involves the interpersonal aspects of storytelling — a storyteller, and a listener. I theorize that our internal narrator, and our private story, that often goes unshared, are just as important to the healing process, in ways that cannot be achieved through interpersonal relations or with a professional alone. Journaling can certainly help in the process of reflecting on one’s inner-story, as the previous forgiveness story clearly demonstrates. The repeated retelling of life experiences influences the way they register with us emotionally. Psychologists have long understood the value of talk therapy for emotional and mental affliction. But what about the rest of our physical health?

Conclusion

To truly address systemic problems we must look at root causes. Regarding traumas and pain we carry, this means understanding how they all began, and why we are triggered. Forgiveness allows us to do that with understanding and compassion. Simply turning this work over to God or to the law will not root out within us the reasons why a person or circumstance caused our suffering. Neither option addresses or ameliorates the suffering that will continue to occur, for, without properly doing the internal work, we are likely to be traumatized again in the future. This is because. As noted above, reminders, both conscious and unconscious will continue to arise. There is no question that forgiveness acknowledges the humanity in all people, not only those who feel harmed; forgiveness also invests in the humanity of those who do harm, recognizing that they are also suffering and perhaps perpetuating a vicious cycle as victims of past harms themselves.

Martha Nussbaum has claimed that, “[V]ictims do need to mourn and to deal with the losses they have experienced. But that need not entail ongoing payback fantasies about the perpetrator. By turning things over to the law, they transform the injury, making it not just about them, but about what makes society better” (166). Here I disagree with Nussbaum, as she seems to assume that the only feelings that a victim will ever have are anger and spite towards the perpetrator. Turning the role of justice and resolution over to the law is an externalization of that anger and spite and in no way addresses the root causes of the internal suffering that has taken place. When one has been hurt at the hands of another there is now a connection, a transaction that has occurred. Whether perpetrators acknowledge this or not, they have also harmed themselves. As Hannah Arendt aptly puts it, “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were,

be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we could remain the victims of its consequences forever” (237). The health implications to holding onto hatred, and the potential guilt and shame one accumulates through such actions take a toll emotionally, physically as well as socially. Surely, acts of violence tear and create fissures in the social fabric. When people are in pain they often do not make healthy choices. In fact, many people do harm to others as a way of inflicting harm upon themselves because they have been unable to address their suffering in a healthy or productive way. Forgiveness opens the door not only to the victim to heal, but offers hope that the perpetrator may also be able to heal and cease doing continued harm to themselves or others. Handing off this role of redemption or renewal to the law rarely yields this opportunity of hope except perhaps in the practice of restorative justice.

Forgiveness is often confused with reconciliation. Reconciliation can be the desired result of an interpersonal exchange of forgiveness, and often does *begin* with an expression of forgiveness by one who has been hurt, but the healing aspects of forgiveness can take place whether or not forgiveness is ever outwardly communicated to the person responsible for inflicting harm. Since intrapersonal forgiveness involves healing that is done with the true letting go of pain and any hopes of alternative outcomes, I argue that this is truly what defines forgiveness.

I hope that you have been able to see with me that intrapersonal forgiveness is nothing less than central and key to healing and life-affirmation when we have suffered. By making the case that intrapersonal forgiveness is possible, it becomes equally possible to forgive the dead, forgive yourself, and forgive those who neither seem to deserve nor want forgiveness. These instances of forgiveness are all too easily dismissed as merely exceptions to Charles Griswold’s thesis, which limits forgiveness as an “interpersonal moral relation”

between two individuals (xv-xvi). Human beings have been given an incredible resiliency to overcome seemingly insurmountable traumas – physically, spiritually, and emotionally. We have within us these remarkable healing capabilities for both the body and the spirit through our immune system and compassion. It is crucial that we stay connected to our shared humanity, and this we do through forgiving as we retell our story in such a way that it sheds light on our shared existence. The rewards we reap from doing this are greater health, resilience, and life-affirmation, or as Brené Brown would say, “We are the authors of our lives. We write our own daring endings” (253). Why would we want to choose otherwise?

Glossary of Terms

Forgiveness – An internal process by which an individual is able to let go of negative emotions and thoughts, as well as enhance positive emotions and thoughts, toward self and others associated with harms suffered or traumatic events experienced.

Internal Narrative – (Self-story) An internalized narrative integration of past, present and anticipated future which provides lives with a sense of unity and purpose (McAdams 162)

Interpersonal Forgiveness – Process of forgiving that is generally expressed outwardly between individuals to move toward reconciliation or closure. Involves the resolution of conflict resulting from transgressions between two or more individuals, an individual and a group, or between two or more groups. I think of interpersonal forgiveness as a peace process between self and others.

Intrapersonal Forgiveness – Internal process of letting go of negative emotions associated with harms suffered, and restoring a sense of well-being. May or may not be expressed outwardly towards the transgressor or others, and although is experienced internally may also be shared with others. I think of intrapersonal forgiveness as a peace process within the self.

Narrative Medicine – Clinical practice with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, metabolize, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness. (Columbia University)

Reconciliation – Ability to rebuild a relationship after transgressions have occurred. Most often involves both forgiveness and apology by the parties involved.

State Forgiveness – (Situational) Motivation to forgive (or not) in particular circumstances.

Usually conditional to type or severity of the transgression, may also be dependent upon who the perpetrator of the transgression may be.

Story – A narrative that relates a series of connected events that are both real and deeply significant. (Rue 22)

Trait Forgiveness – (Dispositional) More readily able to forgive (or not), characteristic of an individual's personality. Ability to more readily forgive (or not) in a number of different transgressional circumstances.

Unforgiveness – A stress response defined by Worthington and colleagues (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999) as a combination of delayed negative emotions (e.g., resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear) toward a transgressor (Harris 321).

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Endnotes

Introduction

¹ Eckhart Tolle coined the term *pain-body* in describing the very palpable way pain can overwhelm us. Using the term pain-body creates an image of a physical entity that is relatable by those who have suffered excessive or extended periods of pain. Tolle defines the pain-body in the following way, “It is an accumulation of painful life experience that was not fully faced and accepted in the moment it arose. It leaves behind an energy form of emotional pain. It comes together with other energy forms from other instances, and so after some years you have a ‘painbody,’ an energy entity consisting of old emotion” (2014).

Why Forgiveness?

² The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in order to heal the wounds left by Apartheid once the system was abolished in 1994. It has since been replaced by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation beginning in 2000. It was one of the first widely known practice of restorative justice, and has been seen as a model for other efforts in restorative justice movements. Although at times criticized for taking the suffering of victims too lightly, and favoring the perpetrators, it is generally perceived as a success in resolving deep division, for example, in comparison to the Nuremburg Trials of Nazis.

³ Gacaca, pronounced Ga-Cha-Cha, meaning “justice among the grass” was a Rwandan community based trial system that elected judges among community members to hold trials for those within the community who were accused of partaking in the violence of the Rwandan Genocide. It was an old practice that existed prior to the colonization of Rwanda,

and were courts held by the local wise men. This older form of justice was reestablished after the Rwandan Genocide in order to address and alleviate the backlog of over a million cases that were pending. Many prisoners died in prison before they could even have their day before the judge, highlighting the miscarriage of justice, both for the victims of violence and those who stood accused, but unable to make their case in a timely way. Largely seen by Rwandans as a successful judicial practice, it was criticized by human rights groups for having courts headed by unqualified judges. However, due to the severe decimation of a large number of communities at the time, and the extreme need to speed up the process, it was of huge benefit to the communities to find alternative solutions to resolve these cases as expeditiously as possible. In that effort, it was indeed a success.

⁴ The Conflicts in Northern Ireland, sometimes referred to as *The Troubles*, were related to political discontent in the way minority Catholics were being treated by the Protestant majority. It went on for approximately 30 years and cost the lives of thousands. The residual sentiments that still survive today by the surviving families impacted by the violence has also been the focus of many of the forgiveness stories captured by *The Forgiveness Project* curated by Cantacuzino. One such story is Jo Berry's willingness to express forgiveness toward Patrick Magee, the man responsible for a bombing that took her father's life.

<https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/jo-berry-patrick-magee>

⁵ Svetelj does a remarkable job of integrating the various understandings of forgiveness across disciplines and through its use from the 20th century to the present, particularly with regard to the role of globalization and the interconnectedness resulting from the internet

breaking down many previous barriers between cultures. His research included many of the resources that I also had found helpful, including Konstan, McCullough, Toussaint, and Tutu.

Unforgiveness Is a Form of Stress

⁶ I explore pain avoidance in greater depth as a cultural phenomenon as well, and the ways in which pain avoidance specifically creates additional obstacles to the healing process (20-22).

Forgiveness: A History

⁷ Manwelo, using Rawls and classic philosophy, makes the case that reconciliation and forgiveness, as we conceive of them today, did not exist, nor does there appear to be the same urgency for it to exist in these earlier cultures. The basis for wrongs being made right had civic codes, and the idea of changing hearts belonged to the realm of religion, not so much in civic life. However, Manwelo lifts up the words of Rawls in an attempt to understand why the shift in ideas of reconciliation occurred. “Rawls attempts to clarify his thoughts, formulating the question of reconciliation as follows: ‘How is it possible that there may exist a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?’” (Manwelo 18)

As cities became larger, and more cosmopolitan, there was a stronger need to have people of different faiths and traditions living together as neighbors peacefully. This blending of cultures in cities occurred before, during, and after religiously based conflict. There was a greater need to understand one another, and to find ways to settle smaller disputes among individuals in order that the larger community would not suffer. In other words, as our world

becomes smaller, we are coming into contact with more and more people who have differences of opinions and ethical values. There needs to be a way for all to coexist, and one important ingredient to that mix is forgiveness.

⁸ One notable example of this transactional nature of forgiveness can be found in The Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us" (Matt. 6:9-13).

Element 1: Speak Your Truth

⁹ In *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown mentions that she also found Tutu's book to be insightful and powerful (151). Tutu's work in forgiveness on a cultural, national and global level has served as a catalyst for studies in forgiveness the world over.

Forgiveness Narratives

¹⁰ The Zen parable of "maybe" assumes that it is unknown what the consequences of either good or bad fortune will be, and therefore takes a neutral perspective toward both (Watts). Our perceptions about our experiences carry even greater weight than the experience itself. Learning how to remain objective is important to maintaining emotional and psychological wellbeing. See also, Eikenberry (business), Stevens (prison/offender therapy), and Narvaez (neuroscience-moral psychology) for additional perspectives.